XII.

To

SECRETARY *to the* ASIATICK SOCIETY.

SIR,

BEFORE I left *Calcutta*, a Gentleman, with whom I chanced to be diſcourſing of that ſect of people who are diſtinguiſhed from the worſhippers of *Brăhm*, and the followers of MAHOMMED by the appellation *Seek*, informed me that there was a conſiderable number of them ſettled in the city of *Patna*, where they had a College for teaching the tenets of their philoſophy. As *Patna* was in my way to *Banaris*, I no ſooner arrived there than I inquired after the College, and I was preſently conducted to it; and I now requeſt you will pleaſe to lay before the Society, the few obſervations and inquiries which a ſingle viſit of about two hours would admit of my making. If, ſuch as they are, they ſhould hereafter be found uſeful either as a clew to guide another in his reſearches in the ſame path, or to add to ſome future account to render it more complete, my end in troubling you to lay it before the Society is fully anſwered.

I have the honor to ſubſcribe myſelf,

SIR,

Your moſt obedient humble Servant,

CHARLES WILKINS.

Banaris, 1ſt March 1781.

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I FOUND the College of the *Seeks*, ſituated in one of the narrow ſtreets of *Patna*, at no very conſiderable diſtance from the Cuſtom-houſe. I was permitted to enter the outward gate, but, as ſoon as I came to the ſteps which led up into the Chapel, or public hall, I was civilly accoſted by two of the Society. I aſked them if I might aſcend into the hall: They ſaid it was a place of worſhip open to me and to all men; but, at the ſame time, intimated that I muſt take off my ſhoes. As I conſider this ceremony in the ſame light as uncovering my head upon entering any of our temples dedicated to the Deity, I did not heſitate to comply, and I was then politely conducted into the hall, and ſeated upon a carpet, in the midſt of the aſſembly, which was ſo numerous as almoſt to fill the room. The whole building forms a ſquare of about forty feet, raiſed from the ground about ſix or eight ſteps. The hall is in the center, divided from four other apartments by wooden arches, upon pillars of the ſame materials, all neatly carved. This room is rather longer than it is broad. The floor was covered with a neat carpet, and furniſhed with ſix or ſeven low deſks, on which ſtood as many of the books of their law; and the walls, above the arches, were hung with Europe looking glaſſes in gold frames, and pictures of *Muſſulman* Princes, and *Hindoo* Deities. A little room, which, as you enter, is ſituated at the left hand end of the hall, is the chancel, and is furniſhed with an altar covered with a cloth of gold, upon which was laid a round black ſhield over a long broad ſword, and, on either ſide, a *chowry* of peacock's feathers, mounted in a ſilver handle. The altar was raiſed a little above the ground, in a declining poſition. Before it ſtood a low kind of throne plated with ſilver; but rather too ſmall to be uſeful; about it were ſeveral ſilver flower pots and roſe-water

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bottles, and on the left hand ſtood three ſmall *Urns* which appeared to be copper, furniſhed with notches to receive the donations of the charitable. There ſtood alſo near the altar, on a low deſk, a great book of a folio ſize, from which ſome portions are daily read in their divine ſervice. It was covered over with a blue mantle, on which were printed, in ſilver letters, ſome ſelect paſſages of their law.

AFTER I had had a long converſation with two of the congregation, who had politely ſeated themſelves, on each ſide of me, on the carpet, and whom I found very intelligent, notice was given, that it was noon and the hour of divine ſervice. The congregation arranged themſelves upon the carpet, on each ſide of the hall, ſo as to leave a ſpace before the altar from end to end. The great book, deſk, and all, was brought, with ſome little ceremony from the altar, and placed at the oppoſite extremity of the hall. An old man, with a reverend ſilver beard, kneeled down before the deſk with his face towards the altar; and on one ſide of him ſat a man with a ſmall drum, and two or three with cymbals. The book was now opened, and the old man began to chant to the time of the drum and the cymbals; and, at the concluſion of every verſe, moſt of the congregation joined chorus in a reſponſe, with countenances exhibiting great marks of joy. Their tones were by no means harſh; the time was quick; and I learnt that the ſubject was a Hymn in praiſe of the unity, the omnipreſence, and the omnipotence, of the Deity. I was ſingularly delighted with the geſtures of the old man: I never ſaw a countenance ſo expreſſive of infelt joy, whilſt he turned about from one to another, as it were, beſpeaking their aſſents to thoſe truths which his very ſoul ſeemed to be engaged in chanting forth. The Hymn being concluded, which conſiſted of about twenty verſes, the whole congregation got up and preſented their faces

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with joined hands towards the altar, in the attitude of prayer. A young man now ſtood forth; and, with a loud voice and diſtinct accent, ſolemnly pronounced a long prayer or kind of liturgy, at certain periods of which all the people joined in a general reſponſe, ſaying *Wā Gooroo!* They prayed againſt temptation; for grace to do good; for the general good of mankind; and a particular bleſſing to the *Seeks:* and for the ſafety of thoſe who at that time were on their travels. This prayer was followed by a ſhort bleſſing from the old man, and an invitation to the aſſembly to partake of a friendly feaſt. The book was then cloſed and reſtored to its place at the altar, and the people being ſeated as before, two men entered bearing a large iron caldron, called a *Curray*, juſt taken from the fire, and placed it in the center of the hall upon a low ſtool. Theſe were followed by others with five or ſix diſhes, ſome of which were of ſilver, and a large pile of leaves ſewed together with fibres in the form of plates. One of theſe plates was given to each of the Company without diſtinction, and the diſhes being filled from the caldron, their contents were ſerved out till every one had got his ſhare: myſelf was not forgotten; and, as I was reſolved not to give them the ſmalleſt occaſion for offence, I ate up my portion. It was a kind of ſweetmeat, of the conſiſtence of ſoft brown ſugar, compoſed of flower and ſugar mixed up with clarified butter, which is called *Ghee*. Had not the *Ghee* been rancid I ſhould have reliſhed it better. We were next ſerved with a few ſugar plums; and here ended the feaſt and the ceremonies of the day. They told me the religious part of the ceremony was daily repeated five times. I now took my leave, inviting ſome of the principal men amongſt them, who were about to return to their own country through *Banaris*, to pay me a viſit.

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In the courſe of the converſation I was engaged in with the two *Seeks* before the ſervice, I was able to gather the following circumſtances. That the founder of their faith was called *Nūneek Sah*, who flouriſhed about four hundred years ago at *Punjab*, and who, before his apoſtaſy, was a *Hindoo* of the *Kſhétry*, or military tribe; and that his body diſappeared as the *Hindoos* and the *Muſſulmans* were diſputing for it; for upon their removing the cloth which covered it, it was gone. That he left behind him a book, compoſed by himſelf, in verſe and the language of *Punjab*, but a character partly of his own invention; which teaches the doctrines of the faith he had eſtabliſhed. That they call this character, in honor of their founder, *Gooroo-Mookhee: from the mouth of the preceptor;* that this book, of which that ſtanding near the altar, and ſeveral others in the hall, were copies, teaches that there is but one God, omnipotent and omnipreſent; filling all ſpace, and pervading all matter; and that he is to be worſhipped and invoked. That there will be a day of retribution, when virtue will be rewarded and vice puniſhed, (I forgot to aſk in what manner); that it not only commands univerſal toleration, but forbids diſputes with thoſe of another perſuaſion. That it forbids murder, theft, and ſuch other deeds as are, by the majority of mankind, eſteemed crimes againſt ſociety; and inculcates the practice of all the virtues, but particularly an univerſal philantrophy, and a general hoſpitality to ſtrangers and travellers. This is all my ſhort viſit would permit me to learn of this book. It is a folio Volume, containing about four or five hundred pages.

They told me further, that ſome years after this book of *Nāneek Sah* had been promulgated, another made its appearance, now held in almoſt as much eſteem as the former. The name of the author has eſcaped my

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memory; but they favored me with an extract from the book itself in praise of the Deity. The passage had struck my ear on my first entering the hall, when the students were all engaged in reading. From the similarity of the language to the *Hindoovee*, and many *Shanscrit* words, I was able to understand a good deal of it, and I hope, at some future period, to have the honor of laying a translation of it before the Society. They told me I might have copies of both their books, if I would be at the expence of transcribing them.

I NEXT inquired why they were called *Seeks*, and they told me it was a word borrowed from one of the commandments of their founder which signifies "*Learn thou;*" and that it was adopted to distinguish the sect soon after he disappeared. The word, as is well known, has the same import in the *Hindoovee*.

I ASKED them what were the ceremonies used in admitting a proselyte. A person having shewn a sincere inclination to renounce his former opinions, to any five or more *Seeks* assembled together, in any place, as well on the highway as in a house of worship, they send to the first shop where sweetmeats are sold, and procure a small quantity of a particular sort, which is very common, and as I recollect, they call *Batāsā*, and having diluted it in pure water, they sprinkle some of it on the body, and into the eyes of the convert, whilst one of the best instructed repeats to him, in any language with which he is conversant, the chief canons of their faith, exacting from him a solemn promise to abide by them the rest of his life. This is the whole of the ceremony. The new convert may then choose a *Gooroo*, or preceptor, to teach him the language of their scriptures, who first gives him the alphabet to learn, and so leads

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him on, by ſlow degrees, until he wants no further inſtruction. They offered to admit me into their Society; but I declined the honor; contenting myſelf with the alphabet which they told me to guard as the apple of my eye, as it was a ſacred character. I find it differs but little from the *Dewnagur*: The number, order, and powers, of the letters are exactly the ſame. The language itſelf is a mixture of *Perſian*, *Arabic*, and ſome *Shanſcrit*, grafted upon the provincial dialect of *Punjab*, which is a kind of *Hindovee*, or, as it is vulgarly called by us, *Moors*.

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